

Times Free Press

The last chapter of the Tonya Craft case

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Tonya Craft speaks to students at Dalton State...

Photo by Contributed Photo /Times Free Press.

Tonya Craft is not going away — at least not yet.

Seven years after the Catoosa County Sheriff's Office arrested the Chickamauga Elementary School teacher on charges of molesting three children — listing among them her daughter — Craft released a memoir last week. The 400-page volume is a story filled with the pettiness and gossip often found in small-town tales, ending with a triumphant acquittal on all charges.

Though she changed the names of her adolescent accusers, Craft keeps their mothers in her book, "Accused."

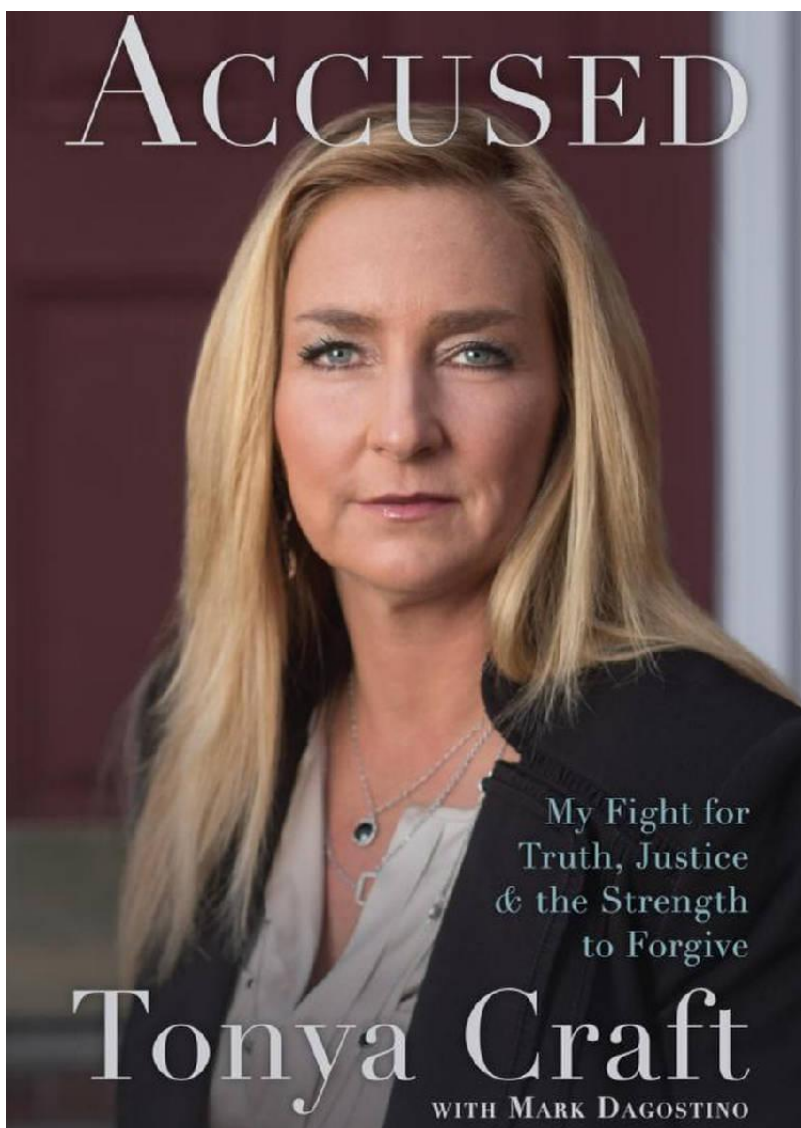
She writes that little arguments with those women led to fractured relationships, and fractured relationships led to 22 counts of child molestation against her. Craft paints the mothers and her ex-husband as crime-novel villains seeking revenge. After the headlines created by her 2010 trial, Craft appeared on "The Today Show" and "Larry King Live."

The villains in Craft's book are the kind of people you run into at the grocery store, the neighborhood pool, high school football games.

"I didn't put them in (the book)," she said. "They put themselves in there."

But the purpose of "Accused" is not to air out small-town grievances among mothers, Craft said. She contends she wrote it to expose institutional injustices perpetuated by local government officials.

With that respect, some of the subjects of Craft's most scathing accusations refute her versions of events.



The setup

In the months before her 2008 arrest, Craft wrote, she had several tense interactions with Dewayne Wilson, the Walker County coroner and CEO of Angel Emergency

Medical Services. Wilson's daughter was in Craft's kindergarten class, and Craft suggested she take remedial courses the following year.

Craft wrote, Wilson threatened her in a meeting: "All of a sudden Dewayne Wilson stood up, grabbed a book, and flung it forcibly across the table. It nearly hit me in the chest. 'Somebody dropped the ball!' he shouted. 'Somebody's gonna pay! And we all know who that is!'"

Though his daughter was not one of the accusers, she implies that he helped orchestrate the charges. She also blames the mothers of two accusers, saying they manipulated their daughters into testifying because of an argument at a children's birthday party.

Wilson, who has a contract with the Catoosa County government to provide ambulance services, said the allegation against him is "beyond untrue," that he did not threaten Craft or throw anything. He asked the Times Free Press to contact Chickamauga Schools officials. Superintendent Melody Day did not witness their meeting, but she said the school's principal told her last week that she was there and does not remember Wilson threatening Craft.

"This is a horrific situation for everybody involved, Tonya included," Day said. "I don't see any good that could come from (the book). To me, it's just an opportunistic thing."

The arrest

Craft also described investigator Tim Deal as an officer who wanted an arrest regardless of evidence. She recalled the following conversation with her attorney, Chris Townley.

Townley: "I worked on a murder case that he investigated not too long ago, and my client pled out. My plea didn't include any jail time, and Tim wasn't too happy about that."

Craft: "So what does that have to do with me?"

Townley: "Well, Detective Deal vowed to 'put that girl away for life' and he failed. And in the message he left me, he swore to me that 'this one won't get away.' Meaning you."

When asked last week for a response from himself or from Deal, Catoosa County Sheriff Gary Sisk responded in an email, "Good luck."

Townley, Craft's attorney for a couple of months early on, said he could not address specifics because of attorney-client privilege. Asked about the book in general, he added, "My memory of events differs from hers. People who work with me significantly won't have much trouble noticing some things that are incorrect."

Those details miss the point, though, he added: "She was not being treated fairly by the government, at least when I was involved."

The prosecution

Craft recalled a May 2008 conversation she had with Townley when she learned police were investigating her.

Townley: "(Lookout Mountain Judicial Circuit District Attorney Herbert "Buzz" Franklin) called me back a few minutes ago "

Craft: "And?"

Townley: "He said that there were too many holes in the case, and that an arrest warrant would not be issued."

Last week, Franklin did not return an email from the Times Free Press asking about that passage in Craft's book. Regardless of Craft's recollection, Franklin chose to pursue the case.

The future

"Accused" seems to be the conclusion of Craft's public saga.

Her trial drew attention in part because of how odd it seemed to see someone like her at the defense table, especially on such a lurid charge. She was well-spoken, confident, pretty. She had a theatrical lawyer from Michigan and a revolving door of academics who told the jury that Craft's accusers had been manipulated by parents and police. Over and over, the defense argued during the case, the children changed their testimonies as they were asked leading questions.

After a jury found her not guilty, Craft swore she would turn the case's notoriety into a positive change for the community. She went to law school, a career route she was considering before her arrest. She is scheduled to graduate this spring and is interning for Hamilton County District Attorney Neil Pinkston.

She wrote that she wants to reform "the system," a vague but popular goal. Asked last week specifically what she envisions, Craft said she just wants to change the people pulling the levers of power.

She said she met with the FBI in 2011, showing them a 1,200-page slide show about her case. She believes she proved that law enforcement officials committed crimes while investigating her, though she does not know if the FBI will ever do anything with her information.

She also maintains that her accusers are, in fact, victims — but not because of her. She says adults manipulated them, causing the children psychological damage.

She'd like to meet with the prosecutors and the investigators, five years later, to point out errors that would make them better at their jobs.

"I would work with anyone and sit down with anyone and say positive things to move forward," she said. "But you have to have two willing participants."

Last week, Craft promoted her book locally, talking about her case and about being a potential beacon of local criminal justice reform.

Now the promotion cycle is finished. Will anything concrete happen because of the Craft case? Or was it all just entertainment, a trial with a lot of attention and little call (or reason) for action?

"If these individuals are not going to recognize that what they did was wrong and try to change it," she said, "they need to, at a minimum, not have their jobs."

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